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RHODE ISLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REPORT OF THE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE WEST WING OF THE SOCIETY'S BUILDING

1913–1914

PROVIDENCE
PRINTED FOR THE SOCIETY
1914

THE "CABINET" or building of the Rhode Island Historical Society was originally a two-story structure, measuring 50 by 30 feet, designed by James C. Bucklin. It was constructed in 1844 on the lot on Waterman Street, one-half of which had been given to the Society by the heirs of Nathan Waterman for this purpose. The cost of the building, as reported to the Society, was $5260. Three thousand dollars of this amount was the proceeds of a right to hold a lottery, granted by the state legislature, and sold by the Society to a lottery-broker. The remainder was raised by subscription.

In 1891, two three-story wings, each 50 by 22 feet, and a domed lecture-room and picture-gallery 30 feet square, at the rear of the original Cabinet, and between the wings, were added, giving the building the shape of a squat T. The plans for these additions were drawn by Alfred Stone, who was for many years deeply interested in the welfare of the Society. The cost, about $20,000, was contributed by subscribers whose names appear in the printed Proceedings for 1892.

The outer walls of 1844 were ruggedly built of rubble, covered with plaster. The same construction was used in 1891, for the outer walls, the partitions being of brick. The main floor of the 1891 addition was of wood laid on brick arches. The other floors, the stairways, and the interior fittings were of wood, the construction being highly inflammable. The danger from fire was so apparent that it was frequenty discussed, and various plans were suggested for doing away with the constant likelihood of a catastrophe.

At a meeting of the Library Committee held on February 17, 1913, this danger was discussed, and it was decided that the most practical scheme would be to make the west wing of the building fireproof. Tentative plans which had been submitted by the Librarian to the Committee were approved and it was voted to ask the Executive Committee of the Society to consider the immediate reconstruction of certain parts of the building. On March 21, the vote of the Library Committee was reported to the Executive Committee, together with plans, specifications and estimates. The Executive Com-

mittee approved the proposed general plan, and referred the matter to the Committee on Grounds and Building. This Committee gave the details of the plan careful consideration, and at its request the Librarian drew up the specifications and secured definite bids. At the quarterly meeting of the Society, held April 1, the Committee on Grounds and Building reported to the Society, recommending that the west wing of the Cabinet be made fireproof, and suggesting that the plans embodied in the report be carried out as soon as funds could be secured. The Society thereupon voted that a Special Committee be appointed to raise the necessary money for reconstructing the west wing. This Committee consisted of Prof. Wilfred H. Munro, President of the Society; Hon. Charles Dean Kimball, Chairman of the Committee on Grounds and Building; Mr. Edward Aborn Greene; Mr. George Parker Winship; and Mr. Howard M. Chapin, Librarian of the Society. Former Governor Kimball, on account of business engagements, was unable to serve on the Committee. Mr. Greene was appointed Treasurer of the Committee.

This Committee sent out a circular letter, the cost of which was contributed in part by Mr. D. Berkeley Updike, to all the members of the Society, explaining the need, the purpose and the scope of the work contemplated, and asking for contributions. The Committee also appealed directly to a number of persons who were known to be interested in the welfare of the Society. They were encouraged to do this by the fact that two subscriptions, one the smallest and one of the largest, were brought to the building after the first announcement of the plan in the newspapers, and before any personal appeals had been made. At the regular quarterly meeting of the Society in July, the Committee reported sufficient contributions to justify beginning the work of reconstruction, and explained in detail what was proposed to be done. This report was accepted by the Society, and the Committee at once proceeded to carry out the plans.

The Librarian had made a careful study of the plans as first submitted, in consultation with practical builders and fire insurance experts, and a number of economical changes were

Newspaper Room, showing the upright shelving

introduced without sacrificing any essential conveniences. These plans having been approved by the Committee, they were submitted to Mr. George L. Shepley, Mr. Charles B. Mackinney, Mr. Knight C. Richmond, and Mr. Henry T. Grant, who very generously offered to examine them from the point of view of fire insurance experts and who suggested a few changes which were incorporated into the plans. Final bids were then asked for, and the contract for the structural work was let to the C. B. Maguire Company. This work was begun in July and was completed before the date of the annual meeting in January.

As soon as it was certain that the reconstruction could be carried through, the books and articles in the museum were removed from the west wing to other parts of the building. This in itself was a considerable piece of work, for there were over 30,000 books in this part of the building and the whole upper floor was occupied by the miscellaneous and unwieldy objects of the museum, the number of which it is impossible to estimate with any approach to accuracy.

As soon as the contents had been removed, all of the woodwork was taken out of this wing. This involved the removal of all the floors, the partitions, the windows and window-frames, the stairs and the roof. Reinforced concrete floors with granolithic surface were then constructed for the second and third stories, and a granolithic surface put on the brick arches supporting the first floor. A tile roof supported by steel beams replaced the old one. The new roof was covered with tin so as to give as nearly as possible its former appearance and so retain the symmetry of the building. Metal window-frames and metal sashes with wired glass panes were put in all of the windows, which were for the first time supplied with catches.

A spiral iron staircase was erected in a brick and tile fire-well which at each floor is shut off from the rest of the wing by an automatic metal fire-door. All the openings between the west wing and the rest of the building were bricked up, except the one on the main floor which serves as the only entrance to the reconstructed portion. This is fitted with a self-shutting metal fire-door which opens from the main room into the fire-proof stair-well.

The main floor of the wing is divided into two rooms, the larger one containing the collection of Rhode Island books, while the other, which retains the name and purpose of the old "vault," is for manuscripts and more valuable books. Twelve-inch Library Bureau shelving was set up in the vault and eight-inch shelving in the Rhode Island room as well as on the floor above. In the vault there was an apparently useless triangular space left by the head-room of the rear entrance to the basement. This space was very satisfactorily filled with a specially constructed metal map case, containing 48 tubes 4″ x 4″ x 60″ for the larger Rhode Island maps.

The third or top floor, which is devoted to newspapers, was fitted with two sorts of cases. Thirteen cases designed to hold the less used newspapers in an upright position were constructed by the Narragansett Machine Company, which also built a combination reading-table and filing-case. The current papers are kept in this case as they are received, until enough numbers have accumulated to make a bound volume, while the top of the case is used as a desk by readers who consult the newspapers. In addition there are six cases fitted with horizontal rolling shelves which were purchased from the Art Metal Construction Company of Boston, and are used to hold those heavier newspapers which are most frequently used.

In fourteen months the money for the work had been raised, the entire contents of the wing had been removed, the whole interior as well as the roof reconstructed, the books put in their places on new shelving, and the bills paid. In all, the Committee had, including the interest on its deposit at the bank, $8,114.68. Of this amount, one thousand dollars was transferred to the fund for the reconstruction of the west wing, by a vote of the Executive Committee on September 11, 1913, from the money received for easement from the Rhode Island Company on account of the tunnel under the building.

Our Rhode Island collection of more than 15,000 volumes is now all housed in this fireproof repository. On the top floor we have over 6500 bound volumes of Rhode Island newspapers. This is the best collection of any single state's newspapers in any one library. We have on the second floor our

local pension papers, census returns, manuscript account books, and early United States Government documents. On the main floor, we have in the vault all of our more valuable manuscripts and books, our Rhode Island maps and broadsides, and our newspapers and books printed before 1800. In the Rhode Island room we have all of our books dealing with the history of the state, together with our collection of Rhode Island portraits and Rhode Island views, arranged alphabetically in a metal vertical filing case.

In the basement, which was fitted with specially constructed movable shelving designed by the Librarian and made by the Narragansett Machine Company, we have one room filled with the manuscript papers of our local Custom House, one of the three or four such collections that have escaped destruction, and another room containing at the present time, and until it is needed for more important volumes, our duplicate Rhode Island material.

This Committee takes much satisfaction in reporting that it has accomplished the work for which it was appointed. The Rhode Island books, manuscripts, and newspapers belonging to the Society, and those which it holds in trust for the state, are now placed beyond the danger of loss by fire.

This fact ought not to hide the danger which continues to threaten the rest of the Historical Society building. The Committee on the west wing, in handing over the small surplus left after paying all the bills which it contracted, earnestly recommends that this amount be set aside, with any other money that the Society can use for the purpose, as the nucleus of a fund to be used in rendering the east wing, and especially the original Cabinet of the Society, fireproof.

Respectfully submitted,

Wilfred H. Munro,
Edward Aborn Greene,
George Parker Winship,
Howard M. Chapin,

Committee.

Map Case

Above the map case is the original grant of arms made to Governor Cranston and at the left hangs the earliest map of Rhode Island

Rhode Island Historical Society in account with

Dr.

			Voucher		
1913					
Sept.	10	To Charles B. Maguire Co. .	No. 1	$850 00	
	22	" The Church House . .	" 2	17 45	
	24	" Edward Wilkinson & Co. .	" 3	117 41	
Oct.	21	" Charles B. Maguire Co. .	" 4	2,100 00	
Nov.	12	" Charles B. Maguire Co. .	" 5	900 00	
	28	" Smith & Carlton . . .	" 6	144 46	
Dec.	11	" Charles B. Maguire Co. .	" 7	678 00	
	31	" Library Bureau . . .	" 8	715 00	
1914					
Jan.	9	" Narragansett Machine Co. .	" 9	350 00	
	17	" H. B. Loud Electric Co. .	" 10	36 50	
	28	" Library Bureau . . .	" 11	38 50	
		" The Church House . .	" 12	5 27	
Feb.	21	" Narragansett Machine Co. .	" 13	75 00	
March	9	" Charles B. Maguire Co. .	" 14	490 89	
		" Thomas W. Allard . .	" 15	20 00	
April	7	" Art Metal Construction Co.	" 16	745 00	
	10	" The Church House . .	" 17	3 96	
	13	" Library Bureau . . .	" 18	490 00	
	17	" The Church House . .	" 19	3 06	
May	1	" Narragansett Machine Co. .	" 20	131 50	
	9	" Narragansett Machine Co. .	" 21	150 00	$8,062 00
June	29	" Cheque to the order of the Rhode Island Historical Society: Bal. acct.			52 68
					$8,114 68

Providence, R. I., June 29, 1914

Edward Aborn Greene, Treasurer

EDWARD ABORN GREENE, TREASURER OF SPECIAL COMMITTEE

CR.

1913		By Subscription :		
April	23	John Shepard, Jr.	$100 00	
		William Ely	100 00	
		Anna Reed Wilkinson	10 00	
		Anthony T. Briggs	5 00	$215 00
	28	Sophia Augusta Brown Sherman	1,000 00	1,000 00
May	16	Josephine A. Binney	25 00	25 00
July	25	R. H. I. Goddard	250 00	250 00
Aug.	19	Stephen O. Metcalf	500 00	500 00
Sept.	3	Lyra Brown Nickerson	500 00	
		Estate Wm. B. Weeden	100 00	600 00
	24	Mr. & Mrs. Jesse H. Metcalf	1,000 00	1,000 00
Oct.	3	Samuel P. Colt	500 00	500 00
	7	William Arthur Wing	10 00	10 00
	14	R. I. Gammell	500 00	
		Eliza G. Radeke	50 00	
		George Parker Winship	25 00	575 00
	15	W. S. Granger	10 00	10 00
	25	Henry D. Sharpe	500 00	500 00
	31	Jonathan Chace	25 00	25 00
Nov.	1	Interest to October 25, 1913	17 06	17 06
		Subscription :		
	3	William Gammell	500 00	500 00
	4	Cyrus P. Brown	10 00	10 00
	5	A Friend	50 00	50 00
	21	Arthur W. Dennis	25 00	25 00
	25	Charles Dean Kimball	25 00	25 00
	26	Frank L. Day	10 00	10 00
Dec.	5	Frank H. Cranston	50 00	50 00
	8	S. H. Tingley	100 00	100 00
	18	Samuel M. Nicholson	150 00	150 00
	31	Maria L. Corliss	300 00	300 00
1914				
Jan.	7	Frank W. Matteson	300 00	300 00
	9	Samuel A. Hazard	25 00	25 00
Feb.	9	William L. Hodgman	50 00	
		Charles V. Chapin	10 00	60 00
	10	Nelson W. Aldrich	300 00	300 00
March	2	Henry T. Grant	10 00	10 00
	16	Charles H. Warren	10 00	10 00
	25	Rhode Island Historical Society	1,000 00	
		Frank Hall Brown	10 00	
		Sarah D. Kimball	10 00	1,020 00
April	8	Eugene P. King	10 00	10 00
May	1	Interest to April 25, 1914	12 62	12 62
		Subscription :		
	9	Stephen O. Edwards	20 00	20 00
				$8,114 68

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